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**Audit-market Intermediaries: Doing Institutional Work in British Research Intensive Universities**

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**Audit-market Intermediaries: Doing Institutional Work in British Research Intensive Universities**

**Abstract.**

Our paper examines the rise of a new category of professional support staff whom we refer to as ‘audit-market intermediaries’ in the context of a rapidly changing regulatory and funding environment in British higher education. We explore the roles they play in articulating environmental changes in research intensive universities related to the auditing of teaching via demands for quality assurance and the marketisation of higher education via the rise of the student as a fee paying consumer. The qualitative data reveals the internal and external sources of legitimacy and power of the audit-market intermediaries as well their contestation. We show how these actors serve as mediators of audit and market forces undertaking institutional work by translating, amplifying or buffering related pressures within the university; and point at the relevance of the specific organisational context for understanding differing patterns of their institutional work.

**Keywords**

Audit-market intermediaries, institutional work, legitimacy and power, situated professionals, institutional theory

**Introduction**

Since the 1980s, widely shared organisational practices in British higher education have been challenged by various waves of deep change in the regulation and funding of universities (Kogan et al. 2000; Palfreyman and Tapper 2014). Political, economic and ideological pressures have led to the re-structuring of higher education away from Keynesian welfare state settlements towards market and audit lines. Governmental policies have moved towards a ‘competition state’ (Cerny 1997; 2010) promoting returns by opening up the field to market forces accompanied by increasing state regulation (Author 2008). The field of higher education has experienced an extension of government surveillance, performance appraisal and audit into research as well as into teaching and learning. In parallel, quasi-market mechanisms have been introduced into higher education, student fees have been raised, the student has been reconceptualised as a consumer and related consumer information systems and rankings have been established (Author 2011; Brown and Carasso 2013).

This political agenda has unleashed institutional pressures on universities that has generated the organisational need and space for the emergence of ‘new professionals’ who support processes in research and teaching as well as strategic leadership and management in areas such as research management, quality management in education, staff development, student engagement and career advice, or ranking management. We refer to this occupational group as ‘new’ given that their rise is intimately tied to changes in contexts and conditions in higher

education over recent decades and that their staff roles span boundaries between academic, administrative and management domains. Drawing on Schneiderberg's (2013) discussion of 'organisational professionalism', we characterise this new occupational group as 'situated' professionals, a concept that extends the traditional perspective on 'pure professions' (such as doctors and lawyers) to a wider range of experts working in organisational contexts (Noordegraaf 2007).

The work of Whitchurch (2004; 2006; 2008a; 2008b; 2012) characterises this new space and professional group as a 'third space' and 'third space professionals', who work beyond the traditional academic-administrative divide. This research has mostly been devoted to accounts of change in university management, the mapping and classifying of the new professionals in higher education, their emerging professional identities and interactions with academics and managers in the collaborative 'third space'. It has also influenced research on the rise and functions of new professionals in other countries and in cross national comparative perspectives that highlights common trends as well as variations in national contexts and conditions (Blackmore 2009; Rhoades 2009; Berman and Pitman 2010; Blümel et al. 2010; Author 2013; Schneiderberg et al. 2013; for a literature review, see Schneiderberg and Mercator 2013).

Our study extends this research by exploring the role of the new professionals as institutional workers in the coalface of the university who mediate normative audit-market orders related to teaching and learning. Three questions are explored in this paper: What are the external and internal sources of legitimacy and power of the new professionals? How do they enact institutional work contributing to new practices, changing organisational agendas or languages? What is the influence of the specific organisational context on the institutional work undertaken by the new professionals?

We refer to the new professionals as 'audit-market intermediaries' as they are pivotal portals for the organisational translation, enactment or indeed buffering of audit-market forces in universities. In undertaking the institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006) of mediating pressures from the external environment within the university, the new professionals contribute to maintaining and changing the organisational rules of the game. Our study thus contributes to an emerging body of literature addressing institutional work and institutional entrepreneurship in higher education (Leišytė and Wilkesmann 2016).

Understanding the invisible work of the new professionals also contributes to research on management and managerialism in higher education that has mainly focussed on top-level and middle-level management, including the rise of the academic manager (see Deem 2000, 2003, 2004; Deem and Brehony 2005; Amaral, Meek and Larsen 2003; Meek et al. 2010; Trowler 2010; for a literature review, see Bryman 2007; Lumby 2012). By focussing on the role of the new professionals, our research contributes to the exploration of the micro dynamics of managerial practices and discourses at the heart of teaching and learning.

Finally, we contribute to studies exploring the role of the specific organisational context for understanding the rise and role of the new professionals (Noordegraaf 2007, 2015; Whitchurch 2012; Schneiderberg and Merkator 2013) that are situated within local orders with their concrete organisational arrangements, processes and practices (Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013; Author 2015) that influence the spaces for and meanings of doing institutional work.

In the following section, the conceptual framing of the research is discussed based on recent developments around the concept of institutional work in organisation studies. Next, we present the methods and data of our empirical project followed by the research findings. In the light of these, we discuss the results of the study and conclude by pointing at the potential of studying institutional work for higher education research.

**Conceptual Framing: Institutional Work**

Our research draws on the concept of institutional work defined as ‘the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, 215) which has opened up a new perspective within the body of research characterised as institutional theory. Institutional theory has become one of the dominant research perspectives for the study of organisations and has also influenced scholarly work on universities as organisations (for a review, see Cai and Mehari 2015). In the context of institutional theory, institutions are conceptualised as taken for granted ‘cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life’ (Scott 1995, 33). Institutions provide actors in organisational fields with templates for appropriate and legitimate behaviour, and are characterised by a high degree of resilience. Early neo-institutional theory thus emphasised reproduction and stability in organisational forms and conduct (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and tended to depict organisational fields and their

members as rather passive recipients of institutional frameworks that would eventually lead to organisational isomorphism.

Such conceptions of the reproduction of institutionalised practices were challenged by institutional theorists interested in processes of institutional change (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). A more recent body of institutional theory has therefore sought to 'bring actors back in' and to explore the role of agency in institutional theory. These studies have introduced the concept of 'institutional entrepreneurship' and have largely focussed on organisational fields and the role of change agents in disrupting existing institutions and creating novel institutions. DiMaggio (1988, 14) argued that 'new institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources (institutional entrepreneurs) see in them an opportunity to realize interests that they value highly.' The concept of institutional entrepreneurship has focused attention on 'projective agency' (Dorado 2005) that allows purposeful actors to frame vital problems or societal needs leading to institutional change based on proposed solutions and alternatives for social practice. Until recently institutional entrepreneurship has found limited interest in the study of higher education (Cai and Mehari 2015). The important recent work of Leišytė and Wilkesmann (2016) points to the potential of exploring the topic of agency and institutional work in the context of universities. Leišytė (2016) provides a theoretical account of the possibility of spaces for academic entrepreneurship in universities within different governance regimes; while the international multi-level study of Wilkesmann (2016) explores the potentials of transformational governance for teaching as a neglected institution; and Schmid and Lauer (2016) provide accounts of teaching entrepreneurs in German universities.

This emerging work highlights that agency can also impact on institutions in ways other than through institutional entrepreneurship affecting field level changes. In many cases, there are decentralised local adoptions where actors working on the micro-foundations of institutional change are not easily identifiable as institutional entrepreneurs. As Greenwood et al. (2011) have argued, change in the institutional environment of organisations calls for enactment within the organisation associated with these changes. Somebody needs to do the institutional work that is required to create, maintain or disrupt institutions and without which institutional pressure might not translate into changing organisational structures and practices. Such institutional work calls for actors who mediate between the organisation and its environment, who provide meaning to institutional pressures, who can theorise the failure of existing norms and practices and provide legitimacy to new norms and practices. It calls for actors who have

the social skills to exert coercive power or soft power, to influence agendas and frame arguments, to engage in persuasion and brokering, and to create space to bring together unusual elements or constellations of actors (Fligstein 1997). In this sense, the concept of institutional work as a research area is apposite to our study as it neither depicts ‘actors as “cultural dopes” trapped by institutional arrangements, or as hypermuscular institutional entrepreneurs’ (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca 2009, 1). Instead, institutional work highlights that intentional actions taken in relation to institutions may be highly visible and dramatic; but may also be rather invisible and incremental.

In our article, we contribute to this debate by highlighting the institutional work of audit-market intermediaries who make sense of, translate and enact institutional pressures in the environment of universities.

**Methods and Data**

Our empirical work incorporated two inter-related steps of data gathering that were undertaken in the context of an international project on ‘New Professionals in Teaching and Learning’. First, the second author of this article mapped field-level changes in regulation and funding, the emergence of new regulatory and funding bodies as well as the rise and profile of the new professionals through policy literature analyses, statistical data and exploratory interviews with key informants.

In the second stage our analysis moved to the lived experience of the new professionals based on interviews that are the focus of the empirical contribution of this article. Primary data collection involved interviews with 31 new professionals from three British research universities (in the following we refer to them as U1, U2, and U3), covering a range of units and staff roles related to teaching and learning. Our focus was thus on gathering in-depth information and narratives from members of this professional group within a specific organisational context. We did not aim at providing a representative overview for all types of new professionals and all types of universities. The three universities were purposely selected focussing on leading, comprehensive research universities which were members of the Russell group; thus keeping certain organisational characteristics constant. At the same time, we analysed university webpages for variation with respect to the organisational embeddedness of the new professionals, including their roles as organisational change agents. University webpages were also scanned to identify interviewees for the research while a few more interviewees were added during the field work.



Table 1 about here

17 of the interviewees were female and 14 were male. Nearly all of the participants had a higher education degree, 14 a PhD and some of the latter had moved from academic career positions into work as new professionals. Other participants had a career background in primary and secondary education, were recruited from field-level organisations in British higher education (e.g. the Quality Assurance Agency, the Higher Education Academy) or from business and industry. Most of the participants were located in central organisational units that would traditionally be described as part of the administration while some of them were integrated into an academic unit. Six of the participants worked in a mid-level management position directing their unit (in our interview quotes we refer to them as Directors of Units (DoU). 14 interviewees worked in the area of educational enhancement (referred to as 'Enhancement'), eight in academic and student services (referred to as 'Services'), five in business management of teaching and learning (referred to as 'BM') and 4 in quality assurance (referred to as 'QA'). In addition, interviews with one high-level academic manager per university were undertaken to add an organisational leadership perspective on the role and work of the new professionals.

The interviews were undertaken by the first author of this article during organisational site-visits lasting up to one week. These visits allowed for some participatory observation and for gathering documents (e.g. organograms, strategic plans, and information leaflets) for a content analysis that was primarily used to deepen our understanding of the specific organisational context and to double-check web-based observations prior to the site visits. Each interview covered a set of common questions around the following themes: career history and work experience, work roles and tasks, work context and relationships, learning experience and career support, emergence of new staff and practices, perceived impact and future work preferences. Interview questions were sometimes modified to probe deeper or to explore emerging themes. Interviews were generally conducted individually; in a few cases two staff members working in the same area were interviewed. The interviews lasted for approximately 45-90 minutes and all were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Our data analysis was guided by our conceptual framework derived from the literature and based on the grounded theory tradition that calls for a mix of inductive and deductive analysis



(Strauss and Corbin 1998). We went through an iterative process moving back and forth between the conceptual framework and the qualitative data. Initially, we read the interview transcripts separately to ensure that both researchers were familiar with the data and to identify emerging themes that were indicative of institutional work by looking for work roles and practices, relationships and hierarchies, sources of legitimacy and power, venues and limitations of influence. We subsequently met several times to identify common themes that were frequently raised by our informants and to condense them into more abstract foci of framing which contributed collectively to our understanding of the ‘issues at work’. Our research design allowed us to address events, experiences and meanings occurring in real-life organisational settings and to draw on the perspectives of a number of new professionals working in different areas, providing a rich perspective on the inherent issues analysed. The first author also contributed insights from field notes on the site visits into this process. In the next step, the authors worked separately and then jointly on the analysis and interpretations of the findings and on identifying relevant parts of the transcripts and interview quotes. While we followed systematic procedures, it is important to note the exploratory nature of our study as well as the processes of selection guided by our conceptual interests. In this sense, our article presents one account of the narratives that emerged out of the interviews and does not cover all aspects of the work experience addressed by the interviewees.

**Findings**

We present our analysis in three steps. First, we discuss the external and internal sources of legitimacy and power of the new professionals as well as their contestation. Second, we examine the use of ‘soft power’ in introducing new practices and contributing to changing organisational agendas and languages. Third, we explore the role of the specific organisational context of the situated professionals for understanding their institutional work. Dealing with these three aspects separately aids in analytical clarity while they were in practice, of course, very much interlinked.

***Contested Sources of Legitimacy and Power***

External audit measures and market measures have penetrated the institutional field of British higher education. In everyday practice, external coercive and normative pressure as well as changing resource dependencies provide rationales for new types of organisational responses. The new professionals derive their legitimacy and positional status partly from these external pressures that legitimise their work and provide an important source of their empowerment.

Many participants reported that over time units and positions have been created in response to governmental agendas and policies:

My original appointment for this role was driven very closely by the need to have a teaching and learning policy, by the need to prepare for the quality assurance environment in which we then operated (U2:4, Services).

Participants indicated that staffing investments were made ‘to impact league tables’ (U3:1, Services), due to ‘the importance of the National Student Survey’ (U2:1, DoU), ‘when students’ parents want to see value for money’ (U3:3:6, Services) and many interviewees expected that ‘with the changing fee structure in the UK, it [the enhancement of teaching and learning] is going to inevitably become even more important’ (U1:8, Enhancement).

At the time of the interviews, universities were overhauling their structures and processes for student support and engagement and identifying specific areas for improvement such as student feedback and graduate employability. These are measures that loom important in student satisfaction surveys while being traditionally neglected by research intensive universities. Codes of conduct for students were in preparation as well as measures to standardise ‘good practice’ in teaching and learning across the organisation. These aimed to strengthen central control as well as to buffer the university from the expected rise of complaints from students as customers.

External change thus translated into intra-organisational responses in which central and decentral university leadership expected the new professionals to play an instrumental role. Some participants reported that they were called upon to ‘support the strategic development within the institution’ (U2:5, DoU) and were involved in ‘feeding up the more senior steer’ (U1:8, Enhancement). New professionals heading their units reported being ‘quite heavily involved in strategic decision-making’ (U3:7, Enhancement) on teaching and learning at the top of the university. Some other new professionals reported that they gained in power and influence by being responsible for university-wide or faculty-wide organisational change projects.

Ties to other universities, to intermediary bodies and within self-organised professional networks provided according to our participants an important source of expert knowledge that they diffused across organisational boundaries. This has been instrumental in gaining intra-organisational recognition and influence:

One of the things as enhancers we bring is the knowledge of what's going on more broadly, and we bring good practice from outside . . . . So, if the university wants to be agile about addressing issues quickly and effectively and efficiently, then to lose that might be a problem (U3:7, Enhancement).

Our research revealed that the base of legitimacy and influence for the new professionals is also contested and fragile and many participants were reflective of the more vulnerable side of their position within the universities. They perceived political agendas of governments and organisational leadership as being in constant flux. More experienced participants reported hypes or fashions that faded away as quickly as they emerged, of internal administrative re-organisations that shifted from de-centralisation to centralisation and back, and wholesale re-packaging of their work portfolio. In addition, and in times of resource constraints, external and internal funding for their work was reported to be moving from more long-term institutionalised budgets towards temporary, short-term project budgets.

Their work was also deeply embedded into the ongoing struggle around the conflict between teaching and research and the institutionalised priority of the latter in universities that 'are research driven' (U3:6, Enhancement) and where 'it is the research that is really going to make the difference' (U1:4, Services). Teaching and learning was perceived to come second, certainly on the academic agendas where professional standards, individual career motivations and governmental research evaluations and funding all prioritise research.

That makes sometimes our work quite hard to actually get access because the things that drive academics are their research ratings, the research funding (U3:6, Enhancement).

Struggle and conflict between academics and new professionals was frequently reported and not only reflected the traditional academic-administration divide but the functional complexity of universities in relation to research and teaching. By prioritising teaching, the new professionals were perceived as acting against the interests of academics who value their role as researchers above that of being teachers (see also Bolden, Petrov and Gosling 2009). The work of the new professionals thus provided a counterpoint to the research-led academic logic by linking a teaching-led logic to their emerging professional project.

***Buffering, Translating, Persuading and Disrupting***

At first glance, the rise of these units and roles in universities reminds us of well-known institutionalist accounts of organisations as 'myth and ceremony' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and related analyses of structural organisational responses to environmental change via the

compartmentalisation of organisational units following different logics. Universities have created new structures for quality assurance, staff and curriculum development, career services and recruited new expert staff de-coupled from the primary processes of teaching and learning. Compartmentalisation signals the good face of the organisation in complying with changes in their institutional environment while leaving the core technology largely untouched. Along these lines, some of our interviewees in business management and quality assurance addressed their role as ‘support staff to facilitate our academics’ (U1:7, BM) or as administrative roles with distinctive features and clear boundaries ‘where processes and procedures and regulatory things are covered in a very, very reliable way’ (U3:10, BM).

More frequently though, our interviewees stressed their own innovative agency in advocating new practices, in framing arguments and persuading relevant others of the need for change, and in building collaborations and alliances.

Many of the participants emphasised their intrinsic motivation towards enhancing teaching and learning, improving the student experience and the standing of their organisation. In practice though, advocating new practices and framing arguments for change involved mobilising external pressures to legitimise the unavoidable need for change to relevant others, most notably the academic community.

Persuading relevant others thus involved ‘gently breaking down barriers’ (U1:6, DoU), being ‘brokers’ (U3:1, Services) and ‘translating ... between the two discourses’ (U3:8, Services), ‘repeating it ... we have to make changes for the next century’ (U1:1, BM).

Such processes called for skilful actors working beyond the technical side of their portfolio and in one of the universities the need for related skills development was pro-actively supported:

We ran a staff development workshop on advocacy, on how do I go and work in colleges, how do I act as an advocate for the service (U3:3, Services).

Such skills were also useful for building alliances with some academics in creating a ‘third space’ (Whitchurch 2006) where peer groups consisting of the new professionals and some academics emerged to work together collegially:

I think certain new kinds of academics have emerged as well, who are particularly interested in being involved in quality system (U2:10, Enhancement).

Tasks were also shifting from academics to the new professionals and vice versa in complex ways. There was overall more permeability between academia and administration as boundaries between the university and the external context and between different functional areas within universities became more porous (see also Whitchurch 2004; 2006). A process of ‘normalisation’ was beginning to be entrenched where languages and practices that were once new and contested became more taken-for-granted within the organisations.

From the point of view of many participants, this institutional work was thus an uphill battle against long-established institutional orders and practices showing, however, indications of success in changing organisational languages and practices. Many participants reported that initial suspicion of their work and academic-administrative antagonism had diminished.

Finally, in the context of the erosion of collegial governance and decision making, some participants took on a key role in supporting practices which disrupted traditional academic cultures and channelled in practices of corporate management. In other words, they became the conduits for translating the external forces into the university as a more market based and managerial organisation, a pattern that was most clearly expressed in U3:

We have changed the culture .... I could not have talked about business plans, about performance expectations, about marketing strategies, because the language of business was complete anathema to the university, whereas now it is very much embedded (U3:9, HoD).

In contrast to embracing such changes, other participants expressed concern that the enactment of the market and the audit worked together to develop rationalities and organisational practices which appear only superficially to be in the interest of better teaching and learning:

Probably there is nothing wrong with that [the student as a customer], provided you put the student at the centre of the educational experience .... My worry is that in this country, we are moving away from any kind of model that puts the learners ... at the centre of a learning experience (U1:2, Enhancement).

**Institutional Work in Organisational Context**

The patterns of institutional work mapped out above can be found to some extent in all three universities included in our study. The specific organisational context is, however, meaningful for understanding variations in the spaces for and practices of the new professionals within these organisations. As situated professionals (Noordegraaf 2007, 2015;

Whitchurch 2012; Schneiderberg and Merkator 2013) they are not only expected to bring specialised knowledge and experience to bear on organisational problem-solving but are also part of an organisational local order which may follow divergent organisational arrangements and processes. While there were communalities as discussed in the sections above, our findings also reveal that there were local differences in the recruitment, organisational location and specific ways in which the new professionals were deployed.

U1 had established a special, and according to our interviewees, quite unique way of recruiting and organising many of its new professionals in a central hybrid academic-professional support unit. Many new professionals were active in academic and student services as well as in teaching and learning enhancement. At the same time, they were expected to work as research active and productive academics. The staff that had been recruited to the hybrid academic-professional support unit thus showed a track record both as academic researchers and organisational developers. This central hybrid unit then linked up to other new professionals in the quality management unit who did not have an academic role as well as to the de-centralised new professionals in the colleges and departments that were themselves (former) academics. According to our interviewees this set-up reflected an organisational leadership orientation towards academic values and powers, and an attempt to provide academic credentials to new professionals. In practice, auditing functions were organised in the administrative quality control units and mostly compartmentalised from the work of the new professionals who worked on teaching enhancement. Among the academic-professional support staff, the dominant narrative around institutional work was one of buffering academics from the potentially negative consequences of auditing and policing academic work. Instead the stress was on a slow process of translation and persuasion related to educational enhancement: providing programme platforms for the development of teaching and learning that 'should be owned by the professors . . . with our expert guidance' (U1:7, Enhancement), or identifying bottom-up activities of good practice in teaching and learning and disseminating them, and of developing 'more of a research-informed curriculum' (U1:8, AD).

U2 on the other hand provided us with quite a scattered pattern as regards the organisational embeddedness of the new professionals. They were dispersed among numerous central and decentral administrative units. There was a widespread perception of diversity of work portfolios, of a lack of coordination and a need for more leadership steer and vision. Growth of staff numbers of new professionals had come to an end and the uphill battle of doing



institutional work in teaching and learning was most clearly felt in U2 given organisational priorities in research as well as the powerful position of the academic departments. The new professionals found some support for their work in the changing regulatory and funding environment, including rankings, while being mostly locked into the role of changing formal rules and routines as well as trying to standardise these across the university. Among the three universities, U2 reflected a more administrative logic underlying institutional work undertaken by the new professionals. They were mainly compartmentalised in administrative units with the related recognition that they were ‘seen solely as administrative staff’ (U2-4, Enhancement) and ‘getting an awful lot of resistance’ (U2-3, BM).

In contrast, we found U3, a university that was traditionally described as a sleeping academic beauty, in the midst of a wholesale organisational change process driven by managerial imperatives of effectiveness and efficiency, and the ambition to climb in rankings. Most new professionals were brought together in a central administrative unit and new staff had been hired mainly from business or intermediary organisations. University-wide plans for educational enhancement were rolled out and new professionals were expected to actively feed into the leadership steer and run university-wide or faculty-wide change projects. Joint seminars were organised for academics, managers and administrators to bridge the traditional academic-administrative divide. Among the three universities, U3 most clearly reflected a more disruptive account of institutional work where the new professionals were expected to align with and contribute to the managerial change project of turning the organisation into a more corporate entrepreneurial university. Most of the new professionals embraced their role as manager-professionals, citing the ‘huge changes in organisation’ (U3-3, AD) and declaring that ‘the language of business was very much embedded’ (U3-9, HoD). Their actual deployment was highly differentiated ranging from routine work to institutional entrepreneurship: providing the rules and routines to support the managerial bureaucracy, inventing and implementing mechanisms for organisational and faculty self-surveillance, or re-organisations of systems of job appraisal and promotion.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The motivation of this study was to zoom into a specific organisational context – British research universities – and to explore the role of a new group of professional actors within the organisations, i.e. new professionals who support teaching and learning. This group emerged in response to various waves of coercive pressure by new normative orders of auditing that interacted with the rise of market-type mechanisms in an unstable and increasingly



competitive resource environment. We have conceptualised this political agenda as the unfolding of institutional pressures that not only affected organisational leadership and management but also called for further institutional workers in the coalface of teaching and learning to mediate the regulatory and funding regime of the 'audit-market' forces.

Our study revealed that the sources of legitimacy and power of the audit-market intermediaries were three-fold: External norms, rules, and resource dependencies were mobilised to represent the unavoidable need for organisational reactivity. Legitimacy and power were delegated to some audit-market intermediaries by senior leadership in order to cope with environmental change and to reinforce intra-organisational control. Intermediary field-level organisations, other universities and professional self-organisations were also utilised to provide expert templates for the new professionals to change institutional and organisational practices.

Their external and internal sources of legitimacy and power were, however, contested. Agendas and interests of relevant others who provide material and symbolic resources were changing and could not be taken for granted. In addition, supporting and controlling teaching and learning in research universities was revealed as a source of inter-professional conflict with academics who wished to maintain the primacy of research as well as their professional autonomy over their teaching. The institutional work of the audit-market intermediaries can be seen to represent a challenge to the dominant position and the logic of the academic incumbents, i.e. academics who are located in traditionally powerful positions in the academic field who seek to preserve the status quo. The audit-market intermediaries in our study can therefore be potentially conceptualised as challengers in subordinate positions who struggled with the dominant academic logic of the academic incumbents.

The institutional work of the audit-market intermediaries appears to have mobilised a whole range of dimensions of agency: the reproduction of established practices and institutions, more evaluative practices that enabled them to exercise expert judgement to accomplish goals, and institutional entrepreneurship that supported planning for future change.

Our analysis of the institutional work of the new professionals who make sense of, buffer and translate institutional pressures points to the possibility of new normative frameworks and expectations being de-coupled, hybridised and sedimented. Our study revealed structures and processes that resembled the traditionally compartmentalised realm of the academic and the administrator, hybrid and fluid divisions of work in which new forms of collaboration

emerged and shifting tasks between academics and the new professionals, as well as indications of normalisation in which languages and practices derived from audit-market frameworks became internalised.

Such patterns of institutional work were mediated by local organisational orders in which the new professionals were situated. We found variations in the structures, uses and practices of the new professionals within the three universities ranging from a more centralised, hybrid academic-professional service logic; to a more compartmentalised, administrative logic of doing institutional work, and finally to a more disruptive account within a managerial change project turning the organisation into a more entrepreneurial university. The audit-market intermediaries in our study are thus situated professionals (Noordegraaf 2007, 2015; Schneiderberg and Merkator 2013) both in the sense of relying on organisational responses to external pressures for their professionalisation project, and in the sense of being constrained and enabled by local interpretations of their role as experts.

By mobilising more recent conceptual developments in institutional theory, we have sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of the micro-foundations of organisational change and stability within the context of broader macro-level changes in higher education. Bringing conceptualisations of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006) into the study of higher education deepens our insights into the ongoing institutional work in universities within a changing institutional environment (Leišytė and Wilkesmann 2016) while it connects higher education studies with broader developments in institutional theory. In advancing an institutionalist approach that ‘brings actors back in’, we are mindful that our research has been explorative and limited in scope and time. We would thus hope that further research on the institutional work of new and old professional groups in higher education will link up with new developments on the micro-/meso-foundations of institutional change and contribute to an emerging body of research exploring other organisational contexts and countries with their own rationales and policies (Leišytė 2016; Wilkesmann 2016; Schmid and Lauer 2016). As far as Britain is concerned, the struggle is not yet over particularly given new political measures such as the Teaching Excellence Framework are adding further audit-market pressures on the structures and processes in universities.

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	U1	U2	U3	Total
Female	4	6	5	15
Male	5	5	6	16
No degree		1	1	2
Bachelor/Master	2	6	7	15
PhD	7	4	3	14
Director of Unit	2	2	2	6
Unit Staff Member	7	9	9	25
Academic and Student Services	2	4	2	8
Business Management	1	1	3	5
Education Enhancement	5	4	5	14
Quality Assurance	1	2	1	4
Total	9	11	11	31

Table 1. New Professionals Participating in Interview Study by University